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Sign, Sense and Reference: Reflections on Problems
in the Philosophy of Language

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Language, ontologically speaking, *cannot* exist. It is an existential contradiction, not in the sense in which the term is used in existentialism but in the simple sense in which things are supposed to 'exist' empirically, that is, in space and time and hence be apprehensible by the human senses. What 'exists', that is, which is apprehended by the eye or the ear or even by touch as in Braille is not, and cannot be, 'language'. The truth of the statement can easily be checked by anyone by simply opening the page of a book in a language one does not know or by being amidst a people who speak a language one does not understand. This will be found to be as 'true' in the case of those who talk of 'universals of language' as those who write of 'deep structures' which every language must have, forgetting that in case it is an empirical statement then it is, at best, only a probable generalization subject to modification in the light of contrary evidence and in case it is a stipulative definition it is bound to be true, but at the cost of being trivial.

Language, it should be remembered, is a 'living' thing found in innumerable varieties that are ever changing, coming into being and dying like all that lives. But 'life' itself is 'ontologically' unintelligible, at least in the sense in which an inert piece of matter is supposed to be so. Normally, one makes it 'intelligible' by reducing it to 'matter' as far as it is possible and hoping that the rest will also be 'reduced' as 'knowledge' about it increases. 'Reductionism' is not, and cannot be, confined to what is called 'mental' only. It has to be extended to cover all that is non-material, including the 'living' and that which may be regarded as 'trans-mental' or 'spiritual' in the ordinary sense of these terms. Philosophical behaviourism as exemplified in the works of Ryle and Wittgenstein, forgets that 'behaviour' itself cannot be 'understood' if it is reduced or translated without a residuum into physical terms, that is, 'terms' which are used to describe the phenomena studied by such sciences as those of physics and chemistry.

The 'attraction' and 'repulsion' amongst elementary particles or chemical substances is not, and *cannot* be, even analogously the same as is found in 'non-material' phenomena at all levels, unless 'matter' itself is endowed with non-material properties 'analogous' to those found at the level of 'life' or 'mind' or even that which may be called 'trans-mental'. Analogy can work both ways and 'reductionism' *can* be carried in the reverse direction also. If one wants to avoid 'reductionism' one has to accept the 'autonomy' of the realms and conceive of 'intelligibility' in terms of the categories specific to a particular realm and to that alone.

The distinction between the realms occurs at many levels. It is both phenomenological and ontological, and is reflected in the categories we use to articulate and understand those realms. The overlapping at the boundaries and the fact that many objects have various levels intermixed in them creates the problems which have led Wittgenstein and many others to deny the very possibility of any distinctive characteristics of these realms. But this is a manifest 'absurdity', a 'suicidal' position as *all* these persons themselves use language for distinctive designation and demarcation of realms and talk and 'behave' in respect of them as if they were 'really' so.

The 'self-contradiction' involved in all this, both at the level of thought and action, is ignored in the hope that some day it will be resolved, somehow or other. But the sheer 'facticity' of both 'life' and 'language' which just cannot 'be' there on any rational understanding which regards only that as 'intelligible' which is 'essentially' insentient in nature, disproves this. But this poses the paradoxical question as to how that which cannot 'be' still 'is'. The question has haunted all philosophical traditions since their very beginnings, Zeno found 'motion' unintelligible and Parmenides the 'plurality' which surrounded him all the time. The Buddhists could not believe how anything could last longer than the 'moment' when it was born and Śāṅkara could not understand how the 'world' including himself could ever 'be'.

But, unfortunately for the philosophers, these *are*, even if he finds them intrinsically and essentially unintelligible. Normally, this should have led him to suspect that there was something wrong with his notion of 'intelligibility'. But where is the 'philosopher' who can give up his infatuation or obsessive lure of reason, as that 'defines' his very being as a 'philosopher'. What is strange, however, is to see the 'scientist' succumbing to the same temptation.

Life is unintelligible and shall remain so till we regard 'matter' as the *only* thing that can be accepted on rational grounds, as ontologically real.

But, what is 'life'? Can it ever be conceived without the capacity of feeling pleasure or pain, and can what is called 'matter' be ever regarded as having the capacity for feeling them? To bring in the question of 'pleasure' and 'pain' in the context of a consideration of 'reality' is not palatable either to the philosopher or the scientist and to ask whether this can be supposed to be there without some sort of 'consciousness' is to commit the unpardonable sin amongst those who pride themselves as being interested in 'knowledge' and knowledge alone. A philosopher or a scientist is a 'cognitivist' par excellence and 'cogito' is his essence even if he does not say so.

But if 'feeling' is the essence of 'life', can it be conceived without the presence of what we try to convey by the term 'consciousness'? Yet if consciousness is supposed to be present wherever life is found, then one will have to grant consciousness to plants if they are considered as possessing 'life'. Normally, the study concerning them is included in the 'Life-Sciences'. But the implications of this classification have scarcely been paid attention to either by the scientist or the philosopher. Do plants 'feel' pleasure or pain and can they be said to possess consciousness, are questions which it is difficult to decide either way. In case one agrees to characterize them in some such way, the very 'meaning' of these terms will change in a radical manner. On the other hand, if one chooses to deny them these characteristics, one will have to think of the distinction between 'living' and 'non-living' in another way. But can one conceive of 'life' without the capacity for 'feeling' in some way, a capacity that we do not grant to inanimate matter and, in fact, consider it as its defining feature which distinguishes it from all that is regarded as different from it? The recourse to the capacity to 'reproduce' as the distinctive mark between 'living' and 'non-living' is of no avail as there can be no such thing as 'mechanical' reproduction. Also, the phenomenon of 'reproduction' amongst living beings, at least at the bi-sexual level, involves 'intense feeling' as evidenced in their behaviour in that context. Not only this, it is regarded as the example of what is regarded as the most pleasure-giving sensation at the biological level.

Life, then, at all levels presents an ontological paradox in that it *is* what *cannot* be, something whose contradiction is involved in its very being, as it cannot be conceived without its own cessation, that is, 'death'. It is,

to put it mildly, an ontological absurdity as it not only involves time in the mode of 'futurity' within itself, but also 'time' as that which will bring necessarily its end, that is, relapse into that which alone appears to be real, that is, inanimate 'matter'. Heidegger had talked of 'Being-towards-Death' as an essential characteristic of 'Da-Sein' but he not only sees 'death' as something 'outside' life but also confines 'Da-Sein' to life at the human level alone. All existentialist thought suffers from this defect as it is not only 'homo-centric' but also refuses to see the 'life' around at the animal and the plant level. There are radical transformations at all these levels, and within each level, but 'life' shows the same basic characteristic at all of them.

But, are 'life' and 'language' related together in such a way that the one cannot be conceived without the other? In case consciousness is supposed to be necessary for the capacity of feeling pleasure and pain, and if the latter is considered to be an essential characteristic of life, then language in some form or another will have to be granted as being present wherever 'life' is considered to be there. Consciousness expresses, articulates and communicates not only as these are involved in its very nature, but also because it cannot but be conceived, at least in most of the forms that we know of, as being always situated amongst other consciousnesses. Communication between consciousnesses has not only to be through some 'language' or other but also, at its most primary level, in the context of the pleasure or pain that one feels. The cry of pain is a 'call' for help, and the joy or smile or laughter of pleasure an invitation to the others to join and share in it. This is the basic structural situation in which language is embedded, without understanding which its nature cannot be understood at all.

Language, it should be clearly understood, is nothing in itself as it has no being of its own. It is neither 'in-itself' nor 'for-itself', to use the language of the existentialists. It is just 'for-the-other', some 'other' or any 'other' who is 'alive' and has consciousness and is capable of feeling pleasure and pain and wants to share the former and answer the call for help to ameliorate the later.

But, as remarked earlier, 'life' at the level of plants presents a problem. Shall we ascribe consciousness or the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, and hence the possession of language to them? No one will be prepared to go that far, not even perhaps the author of *The Secret Life of Plants*. As for the animal world, there can be little doubt that they do feel pleasure

and pain and actively seek the former and avoid the latter. This makes us grant to them some form of consciousness and the capacity to communicate amongst themselves. The work on the bees and the ants has led to the deciphering of the communication system between them and though it does not consist of spoken speech, it shows that 'behavioural communication' may have a systematic structure analogous to the one we find in language at the human level.

The facts of feeling, consciousness, and language at the human level need no proof even if, for methodological reasons, some may deny the one or the other or even all of them. But the denial, even if it be only for methodological purposes, reveals a new dimension of consciousness which is not found at any non-human level, including that of the anthropoid apes who are regarded as closest to man amongst the animals. This is the ability to deny, to negate, to doubt everything, including itself. In language this is symbolized by the sign of negation without which no language can function as 'language' at the human level.

The possibility of negation, as everyone knows, creates perplexities and dilemmas which have plagued thinking since the very inception of philosophy in India and Greece sometime at the beginning of the first millennium BC. Negation, however, is only *one* aspect of language that has been noticed. The other, and perhaps the more important aspect, is the 'freedom' that it confers on consciousness because of the unending possibility of linguistic combinations that it offers which bring into being new 'worlds' for the apprehension of the listener and, eventually, to that of the speaker also.

The freedom thus conferred brings the world of possibility into being and makes imagination an integral element in the constitution of consciousness propelling one to act in certain ways, or rather deciding to act for the realization of that which was imagined because of the freedom conferred by the possibility opened by the achievement of the linguistic ability at the human level. *Mīmāṃsā* is perhaps the only school of thought in world philosophy which has grasped the 'radical reality' of this aspect of language and formulated it in its notion of 'śābdi' and 'ārthi bhāvanā'. But it has not seen that besides impelling one to desire to act in a certain way, it also not only expresses feeling but also 'creates' the feeling in the listener whose relation to the feeling expressed by the speaker may take diverse forms, ranging from 'similarity' to a tangential resonance which recalls it in a more far-fetched way.

The 'expressive' aspect of language is known and so also its injunctive or imperative aspect. But the intimate relation of these to 'negation' without which no language can function has, as far as I know, not been seen up till now.

Negation is of various kinds and can take multifarious shapes which logic has not yet taken note of. One of the most important of these is the one that lies at the root of moral, aesthetic and spiritual consciousness which, though radically different in the directions of their development, share a common origin which lies in the dissatisfaction with what 'is' and the feeling that something is lacking which would be there if one makes the effort required to bring it into being. Indian thinkers have thought of this in positive terms and called it 'abhāva' and treated it as an ontological correlate of that which functions as 'negation' in language. The acceptance of 'abhāva' as an independent *padārtha* around the tenth century AD shows a radical revolution in the philosophical history of India whose far-reaching repercussions that later occurred resulting in a total recasting of epistemological formulations has not drawn the attention that it should have because of various reasons that are difficult to unravel at present. But the effect that such a postulation could have and perhaps did have, to some extent, on the nature of self's reflection on itself or of self-awareness, is still a matter of historical investigation.

Language at the human level, thus, brings into being a new ontological reality whose character is intrinsically unintelligible as it is a positive 'something' which cannot be as it is 'nothing': a *padārtha* which is an 'abhāva' or a 'non-being' that 'is'. The paradoxical absurdity of such a notion has not been seen because of the fact that the *abhāva* that is talked about is generally the *abhāva* as absence of something specific such as a *ghaṭa* or a *paṭa*. The idea of an *abhāva* which is not an *abhāva* of anything as of 'abhāva-as-such', or pure non-being or *asat* has escaped the attention of Indian thinkers even though it was mentioned as early as the Vedas in the famous *Nāsadiya Sūkta* which is known to everybody. Professor Ramchandra Gandhi has drawn attention to the bewildering character of the question, 'why is not there Nothing?', a question which makes all 'being' contingent and opens the dark abyss before which consciousness recoils as it is that which shows it the possibility of its own cessation which, in the context of life, is called 'death'.

The denial of 'self-consciousness' has been considered by philosophers to be an impossibility as any attempt to do so involves its reassertion once

again. The Cartesian formulation of the contention is well known but it has been known to humanity since it became self-conscious long ago. Śaṅkara's formulation in the Indian tradition has not attracted the attention it deserves but, interestingly, the self-certainty of consciousness, at least in one of its formulations, has been seen in the way it negates all that is 'other' to it, just as the 'other' is seen as that which negates consciousness. The dilemma of a hard-core advaitin is whether he *can* affirm a pure assertion without involving this negation in any form whatsoever. Consciousness may do so, but 'self-consciousness' can never do it and, for language, it is a sheer impossibility.

But if Being is just 'being', language cannot 'be'. Nor, for that matter, can there be self-consciousness if it necessarily involves negation in itself. Yet, as both self-consciousness and language *are*, pure Being cannot Be. The ultimate opposition or negation, therefore, is that of Being and consciousness on the one hand and of Being and self-consciousness on the other. The former arises because of the fact that it questions the 'closedness' of Being and its 'self-grounded' 'self-sufficiency' which has been seen as the hallmark of the 'really real' by most philosophers who ultimately seem to share the common belief that only that which is inconscient can alone be regarded as 'real'. In consciousness, however, the 'other' is only implicitly involved, an 'implicitness' that becomes 'explicit' at the level of self-consciousness. The insufficiency of Being is fully revealed at this level and language at the human level loudly proclaims this fact as it is rooted not only in its relation to the 'other', but in its reflexivity it makes the self an 'other' to itself.

The unending dynamics that this brings into being has seldom been reflected upon as the transformation of self in self-consciousness through the vulnerabilities which this 'opens' because of language has not been seen for the simple reason that thought cannot accept the idea of an 'unending openness' which is essentially indeterminate in principle, as it cannot understand it.

Logic, which is generally the instrument of understanding, is essentially 'closed' as it operates within a set of presuppositions which may be described as 'axioms' or 'assumptions' or 'postulates' without changing the situation in any way. The 'openness' in logic comes, if it comes at all, from 'infinite regress' which is usually regarded as a fallacy. There is another 'openness' which comes from the 'unendingness' of derivations even in a system which is 'closed' because of the axioms or assumptions

or postulates from which it started. The stricter 'closedness' which is introduced by the derivation of the pre-suppositions from the conclusions themselves was, till very recently, regarded as a fallacy known as *petitio principii* or arguing in a circle. Circularity, however, it has recently been argued is not a fallacy, but it is not clear whether the contention is a generalized one, or is a restricted one. In case it is the latter, one would have to give a criterion to distinguish 'virtuous' from 'vicious' circles and, in that case, the contention will be philosophically uninteresting except as drawing attention to the areas where it is considered to be harmless and the reason why it is considered to be so. But if the contention is a generalized one then it will have to be proved that it is in the very nature of a formal deductive system to be circular in nature. But, then, it will have to be clarified what exactly is meant by 'circularity', particularly if the derivations are, as we have said, 'unending' in nature. Not only this, it will have to be argued that either the 'presuppositions' are derivable from each and any of the 'derived' propositions or from the whole set of them, taken together. In the latter case, it is obvious that the set of 'derivations' will have to be a 'closed' set, an assumption which is incompatible with the idea that the 'derivations' are unending in nature.¹

Both circularity and infinite regress, thus, haunt thought all the time and one has always to decide when to treat them as a fallacy or not. Thought has to embody itself in language at the human level and thus has to enter into a strange relationship where the body determines the spirit as much as the spirit determines the body. The mutual 'determination' is so continuous that it is impossible to even conceive of what will be 'pure' thought uncontaminated or 'undetermined' by any language whatsoever. As for the idea of a language undetermined by thought, it is a contradiction in terms as the very being of language consists of the thought it conveys or embodies within itself.

But as language is always specific and as 'translatability' is always an intrinsic characteristic of every language, the 'specificity' of the features imposed by the 'particularities' of the language have always an indefinite 'generality' in-built in it.

No language, however, is static or unchanging and even those who believe in some basic 'structure' of a 'given' language will find it difficult to decide when in the 'evolution' of a language, the 'new' language has become a different species altogether. The universal structural characterization which all languages have necessarily to have, would not help as it

is bound to be either an inductive generalization subject to falsification in face of conflicting evidence or an arbitrary definition which determines in advance what is to be called a 'language' in terms of the definition that has been adopted. The dilemma occurs with all empirical classifications and, surprisingly, even with non-empirical ones such as numbers, as there are always border-line cases when the 'decision' is mainly determined by pragmatic considerations. This has little to do with the essentialist vs. non-essentialist view of definition as whichever view one adopts will have to face the same situation and live with the consequences of the choices one has made.

Thought, language, consciousness, translatability and life are so intimately and interdependently intertwined and interrelated to one another that one cannot even be conceived without the other. Yet, man's thought is so homo-centric that when it tries to 'think' of these it thinks only in terms of itself as if it *alone* represented them, in spite of the fact that he sees 'life' all around him. Plants and animals abound in their myriad forms and though man hesitates to grant them 'predicates' which he freely applies to himself he has perforce to apply some which he will never apply to the non-living world. There is, of course, the wondrous 'world' of stones which has incredible colours and varieties in it. The 'precious' and 'semi-precious' amongst them are well known, but the granite and the marble in their myriad colours are even more enchanting as they form architectural designs standing free or 'floating' in space, silhouetted against the morning or the evening sky.

Yet, whatever the wonder, one will hesitate to call them 'living' even though they may 'appear' and be 'felt' as more 'alive' than those we call 'living'. This quality which seems to surpass the quality of 'living' and make it more alive than 'living' itself comes from that which makes language, which itself *is* 'nothing' or almost nothing, have such pulsating life that which has 'life' gets sustenance from it as can be easily seen when one reads, say, a poem. All art is 'language' and what we call language achieves the status of 'art' when it becomes what 'poetry' is supposed to connote.

Language, then, is the 'key' to the understanding of all that '*is*' as it contains everything in it, even though it is nothing-in-itself, a pure emptiness, a mere sign or just a blank, except when what is written itself becomes 'art' as in calligraphy.

Writing when it assumes the form of calligraphy undergoes a strange transformation as it seems to have 'meaning' even when one does not 'know' the language which is written in it. Another dimension of meaning is, of course, added if one knows the language in which it is written. The relation between the two dimensions is complex, even conflicting, as becomes evident when words are set to music and sung by human voice. All representational art exhibits this ambivalence and compromise as one asks in bewildered wonderment and confusion 'what does it mean?' But what could art possibly mean when it does not have any reference outside itself? Yet, it is not without meaning as an encounter with it not only enriches and uplifts one but lingers in one's memory and constitutes one's being as only the encounter with persons does in one's life. But, then, in both cases it needs a self-conscious being to relate, appreciate, relive, recreate and develop further the 'meaning' that one apprehends and encounters in the 'other'. And, it is not something that is grasped completely ever, but rather something that ever grows within oneself as one returns to it again and again, either in actuality or in memory.

There is, thus, ultimately no reference, but only sense or 'meaning' which is immanent and inexhaustible and without which there is only the dead 'sign' which makes no sense. It waits to be deciphered and till it is deciphered, it is 'nothing', sheer nothing. The 'Real' has no 'outside' to itself and it gives us the illusion that it is so and we ask what does it all mean, when the 'meaning' lies all around us, immediate, immanent and inexhaustible. And, 'immanence' means that everything 'refers' to everything else, even though we may not apprehend it ever fully in that way. The mystery of 'being' is reflected in the mystery of language and one may perhaps get a glimpse into the understanding of the former by understanding the latter. And, as the latter is closer to us and constitutes us in a certain sense, we may understand ourselves through it also. But, then, language will have to be seen in a different way than the contemporary philosophers of language have seen it up till now.

REFERENCE

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